

# **Language immersion and content-based language learning, what's the difference? A survey of different language programs**

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**Abstract** This paper looks at two approaches to teaching language, immersion and content-based teaching. It describes several schemes for content-based teaching found in Japan and language immersion programs implemented in other parts of the world. Similarities and differences are noted and a brief survey is made of some teaching ideas that can be used for both approaches.

## **Introduction**

Content-based language teaching has become a popular way to organize foreign language curriculums. The content-based programs described below are just a sampling, but they run the range from one-off content-based lessons and units to individually designed courses offered by particular teachers to entire degree programs that approach language immersion.

A variety of immersion programs also exist. Many are aimed at integrating students into the native speaking community, for example Spanish speaking children into the English speaking community in America, but some schemes attempt to teach foreign languages, for example English to Japanese children, through immersion as well.

Although these two approaches to language teaching are in some cases literally worlds apart and should not be confused with each other, they do have some characteristics in common.

## **Content-based Programs**

As the name implies, content-based language learning is a way of teaching language through some academic subject rather than teaching language directly. To do this, teachers commonly use content that they are familiar with such as their culture or a specialty course from their major to design content-based language courses. For example, Lingley (2006) describes a course in Canadian Studies that he teaches at Koshi University. The course matches Canadian cultural content with language learning tasks such as dictations and information gap or sharing activities. Similarly, Adamson (2006) has prepared lectures on sociolinguistics for his content-based course at a college in Japan. The lectures are based on course work he did for a degree in Applied Linguistics/TESOL.

Another approach to content-based teaching is to use a subject that is easily accessible to both students and teacher. For example, Messerklinger (2000; 2002) and more recently Shang (2006) explain the benefits of using literature as a vehicle for language instruction. Literature is very accessible to a broad range of students especially now with the increased availability of graded readers. It allows them to practice a range of skills including discussion as well as writing and of course reading.

Other kinds of content courses are those that teach content to students based on their

needs. Some of these are available prepackaged in textbooks such as Oxford University Press's *Basic English for Science* (1978.) Business English courses are another type of content-based course. They usually focus on the language needed for successful business communication rather than the theory and practice of, for example, marketing, but some textbooks do include lessons on basic business skills. Oxford's *Head for Business*, for example, has a unit called "Let's Talk Marketing" which includes a case study "Developing a market strategy."

Unlike a course in socio-linguistics, these textbooks do not necessarily require specialty knowledge on the part of the language teacher. For example, unit 7 in *English for Science* covers basic physics by describing simple cause and effect phenomenon through easy to understand statements such as:

Gases expand when they are heated because they absorb heat energy.  
*English for Science Teacher's Book* p. 84

Sentences such as the one above are used to practice asking and answering questions about cause and effect and not necessarily to teach Charles's Law, one of the gas laws that most students learn in their high school physics and chemistry classes. Likewise, elementary biology, in this case the carbon cycle, is used in simple reading passages to let the students practice comparison:

Although the quantity of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere is relatively small, the gas is essential for supporting life. Plants require carbon dioxide, and they remove it from the air in a process known as photosynthesis. Even though carbon dioxide is therefore being removed from the atmosphere continuously, it is however continuously replaced by animal and plant respiration and decay.  
*English for Science Teacher's Book* p. 87-88

Whilst the content may be too basic for university level students of physics and biology, the focus of the lesson is the language, and students will learn the grammar and vocabulary needed to read and discuss more advanced texts in English that are common in these subject areas.

The most ambitious sorts of content courses, though, are those that require specialty knowledge such as Adamson's course in socio-linguistics or Yoffe's course in international relations. To teach this course, Yoffe (2007) uses his 15 years of experience teaching English in Japan along with his recent experience as an officer working for the Canadian Foreign Service.

Not many teachers have the ability or training to teach a course in international relations, but most do likely have knowledge and interests outside of TESOL. If nothing more, teachers can read a newspaper and bring current topics into the classroom, especially ones in which students have an interest. Cates (1997) urges teachers to do this sort of thing.

In order to bring real world content into the classroom, teachers must step outside the field of English language teaching to access materials and information from outside sources.

Current events give teachers the opportunity to teach vocabulary and the language needed to discuss topics ranging from fashion to sports, movies and music, or if students are interested, other trendy topics like climate change or terrorism. And if the topics are well chosen, students will naturally want to give their opinions and discuss the issues.

Some schools use content-based instruction so extensively that their courses of study approach immersion programs. Osaka Jogakuin College, for example, has incorporated English into many of their classes. According to Osaka Jogakuin College's website, "All students are International & English Interdisciplinary Studies majors," and English makes up one of their "pillars" of education. Students are not merely taught how to use English, but the language is used as the medium of instruction for many of their courses. In addition, students are required to use English to do research, write reports and participate in class.

Along with these specific programs, there are also sources of content-based lesson plans that can be used in the EFL classroom. One source is the *everythingesl* webpage, but as the name of the page implies, these are lesson plans aimed at the ESL classroom and not for students learning English as a foreign language. Many of these lessons are for the elementary and junior high school grades. But besides practicing the four basic skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—students are also asked to do things like predict and hypothesize like pupils would for an elementary school science lesson.

### **Immersion Programs**

Perhaps the best-known language immersion programs are the French Immersion programs in Canada, which were implemented several decades ago at the insistence of English speaking Canadians living in Quebec who wanted their children to learn French. As with content-based learning, the name is descriptive. Students are immersed in the target language, it being the method of communication in the classroom. The basic philosophy of this method of language learning is that the children will acquire the language by using it to learn. It is a way of bringing a foreign or second language environment into the classroom thereby surrounding the children with the target language.

This method is used both in the country where the target language is widely spoken and also in a growing number of schools around the world that use this method of language instruction to teach foreign languages and promote bilingualism. For example, in Numazu, Shizuoka Japan, Mike Bostwick at Katoh Gakuen has developed a successful English language program for Japanese children. Although the curriculum is based on the Mombukagakusho's curriculum for elementary schools in Japan, they have translated it into English so the children have the benefit of an English learning environment without having to forgo the content of a Japanese education.

Many such programs began as international schools. In Japan, there are several

“international” schools that cater to Japanese parents who want their children exposed at an early age to the target language. This can be especially helpful to parents who know they will be assigned to work abroad and will take their families with them. Often times, the easiest option for them is to enroll their children in an international school where the language of instruction is English. Enrolling their children while they are still in Japan will help them become accustomed to the new environment more quickly once they are overseas. An example of this is Aoba International School, which caters to Japanese children as well as to foreign children living in Japan. Their curriculum offers instruction in Japanese leveled from Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) for non-native children to “Kokugo” for native Japanese children.

At another level are the intensive language programs that use the concept of language immersion. Hashim and Balakrishnan (2006) describe one such program that they call a “language camp” for young learners aged 12 to 13 in Malaysia. Their aims for the four-day intensive program and follow up sessions were modest and included motivating learners and raising their self-esteem. Rather than expect an immediate improvement in the children’s language ability, Hashim and Balakrishnan (2006) see the motivation that such intensive courses can generate as contributing to the long-term goal of language proficiency. Although not a true immersion program according to strict definitions since the children are not immersed in the language for more than a few days during the year, this kind of immersion can give young learners an idea of what it is like to be surrounded by the language.

### **Similarities and Differences**

One common element among all these immersion programs is that they are aimed at the primary grades. While some schools offer instruction to junior and senior high school aged children, most begin at the first grade of elementary school with some schools offering pre-school instruction to children as young as two or three years old. There are now even some day care services that use immersion methods to teach infants not even one year old (see for example Downs, Simon 2004.)

Also common to most immersion programs is the aim to develop bilingual language proficiency in children. In the case of foreign language immersion, this is done by recreating as closely as possible conditions found in classrooms where the target language is spoken as the mother tongue. The aim is to teach language by providing an input rich environment to maximize opportunities for language acquisition.

On the other hand, content-based language learning in the EFL context is usually aimed at high school and university aged students. Often, the courses teach English for specific purposes or they are used as a novel way of providing language instruction. Students are not expected to become bilingual as a result of these courses, but to gain competence in using the language for, say, reading a text on science.

### **Different Amount of Language Support for Students**

Another difference between some content-based teaching and language immersion programs is the amount of language support for the students. The various immersion

programs described above have by necessity varying levels of language support for students built into their courses. Fortune and Tedick (2003) explain that many ESL immersion programs, especially for the younger grades, begin with only a few classes such as reading and language arts in the target language, a natural way to begin such instruction, and then add more classes as pupils grow older.

In most immersion programs, however, children are expected to pick up the language from the learning context itself and are not necessarily given much explicit foreign or second language instruction other than what naturally follows from the lesson itself. The principle that underlies this approach has been summed up by Krashen (1981.)

...language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. (p. 6)

Nonetheless, at least one school in Japan, Katoh Gakuen, offers parallel instruction in the learner's native language to support children's language acquisition (Bostwick, 2004-5). The instruction in their native Japanese helps them to confirm the hypothesis they make about the target language.

On the other hand, content-based language classes usually have more language support for learners. One reason is that the courses are usually designed for university aged students and take into consideration the differences in learning styles and time limits of older students. Since they are not immersed in the language and only spend a few hours studying it per week, a much more conscious effort is made to teach things like vocabulary and communication strategies. Although no specific information on teaching methods is available for many of the programs mentioned above, the list of courses offered at Osaka Jogakuin College does include a number of classes under the heading "English Basics" such as phonetics, grammar and speech communication among many others.

Despite these differences, Mangubhai (2005) lists several techniques used by immersion teachers that can be used by EFL teachers including "...questioning downward, rephrasing, recast (sic), modelling (sic) or demonstrating, and the use of visuals and realia." These are techniques that any experienced teacher will naturally turn to when teaching, but they should be kept foremost in mind by teachers attempting to teach language through content. Even after every attempt has been made to give students the language they need to understand a subject, the vocabulary and grammar, teachers can use, for example, recasting to explain an idea in terms that students may find easier to understand.

In addition, there are many other teaching techniques that can be used by both immersion teachers and EFL teachers. For example, information gap activities are not only a useful way to practice language; they can be a fun way for children to learn content. It is easy to imagine a geography lesson where children have incomplete maps of the world with

different information on each and they have to ask each other for the missing information on their maps:

Child A: What country is this?

Child B: It's Canada. It's North of the United States.

Similarly, there are many language games that can be adapted for this lesson. Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1984, p. 158) offer a variation of twenty questions that takes the form of "hide and seek" using language. While older learners may enjoy this as a fun way of using the language, children can play this game while reviewing a lesson on geography. One child decides on an imaginary place to hide, and the other children must ask questions to find where they are on the map.

### **Different Knowledge Support for Teachers**

Just as students need language support, teachers may need knowledge support if they are to teach content that is outside their area of expertise. Brown (2004) notes that teachers may be intimidated by the workload associated with content-based instruction especially if they do not have the necessary background in the subject matter. It is easy to see why teachers such as Lingley (2006) Adamson (2006) and Yoffe (2007) have chosen to teach subjects that they know well.

In ESL immersion programs, the teachers are typically licensed to teach the elementary grades and the issue may in fact be reversed: the teacher knows how to teach the curriculum for the primary grades, but may not feel comfortable if they also have to offer ESL instruction to a student thrown into their classes.

### **Conclusion**

The two approaches to language teaching, language immersion and content-based language teaching, differ in their goals since they address the needs of different learners. Whereas language immersion attempts to develop bilingual language abilities in children, content-based programs are designed for older learners and are either a way of teaching certain language skills in certain subjects, such as helping university students develop the ability to read English language science texts, or they can be a motivating alternative, a literature class for example, to the usual language courses offered at high schools or universities. In the one, language teaching is made part of the content; while in the other content is made part of the language teaching.

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